

## NATIONAL HISTORY DAY EVALUATION, KEY FINDINGS

---

The NHD evaluation, conducted in 4 sites around the country, explored the program's impact through multiple lenses. Using performance assessments, surveys, and standardized assessment scores, we explored NHD students' research and writing skills, their ability to interpret historical information, their academic performance, and their interest in past and current events—all in comparison to peers who don't participate in the program.<sup>1</sup>

On almost every measure, NHD students' scores or ratings were higher. They are better writers, more confident and capable researchers, perform better on high-stakes tests, and have a more mature perspective on current events and civic engagement. The study confirmed—with empirical, independently gathered data—the positive impact of NHD participation on students' academic performance. Moreover, findings suggested that NHD students are better prepared for college, careers, and civic participation.

### Applied Skills

(Data sources: Performance Assessments<sup>2</sup>, N=458, and interviews)

- **NHD students are better writers, who write with a purpose and real voice, and marshal solid evidence to support their point of view.** Even if they are not competing in essay contests, NHD students spend considerable time writing and revising—honing theses statements and exhibit information, crafting scripts for presentations and documentaries, composing process papers, and rehearsing for interviews with experts and sessions with judges.

Independent writing assessments show it pays off: NHD students outscored comparison-group students on both pre- and post-writing assessments, receiving more high scores (5's or 6's) on a 6-point scale, and fewer low scores. NHD essays had more sentence variety, richer vocabulary, a more authentic voice, and organic unity.

- **NHD students are critical thinkers who can digest, analyze, and synthesize information.** Performance assessments show that, overall, NHD students were significantly ( $p < .001$ ) better than their peers at interpreting historical information, with an average of 79% vs. 61% correct. Analyses by site, gender, and ethnicity showed NHD students still outscoring peers. In interviews, NHD students said that reading challenging books and articles gave them the skills and confidence to tackle tough reading assignments in other subjects. Students for whom English is a second language, and who are the first in their families to attend college, say they are up to the challenge of college reading assignments.
- **NHD students already know how to do college-level research.** Performance assessments showed that NHD students' ability to find, evaluate, and use information exceeds their peers'. By a margin of 2 to 1, NHD students correctly identified primary sources. They understand the value of multiple sources and know to look beyond basic sources listed by non-NHD students—books, newspapers, textbooks, and Wikipedia—to experts, personal contacts, museums, lecture notes, diaries, journals, films, first-person accounts, and biographies. NHD students also have a more sophisticated

---

<sup>1</sup> Comparison groups were matched based on demographic factors and prior academic performance.

<sup>2</sup> Students from all 4 sites (N=458) took the same performance assessments; these data were aggregated across sites and broken down by site, gender, ethnicity, and years of NHD participation.

understanding of how to evaluate sources: While peers suggested checking publication date or author, NHD students said they would check for a valid copyright and reputable publisher, look for .edu rather than .com sources, confirm authors' credibility by cross-checking other references, and look for corroboration across sources.

- ***NHD builds college readiness and 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills.*** The above bullets comprise a set of writing and research skills developed through student-directed research. NHD students say they also learn—sometimes the hard way—how to collaborate with team members, talk to experts, manage their time, and persevere. NHD helps them develop the 21<sup>st</sup> Century skills that other students may not gain as a matter of course.

### Academic Performance

(Data sources: student scores on state standardized tests and grades in social studies, language arts, math, and science.<sup>3</sup> N=1000+ per site)

- ***NHD participation positively affects students' academic performance in social studies.*** Student scores from different assessments in different states showed that NHD students often out-perform their peers. Three years of data from the *Texas Assessment of Knowledge and Skills (TAKS)* showed that NHD students scored repeatedly and significantly higher than non-NHD students on the social studies assessment. In 2008-2009, for example, twice as many NHD students as their peers achieved commended performance (87% vs. 37%).

On the 2008-09 South Carolina *U.S. History and the Constitution* end-of-course test, the NHD high school led the district with a 52% passing rate—26 percentage points above the other (non-NHD) high school in the district, 14 points above the district rate, and 9 points above the state rate. At the South Carolina middle school where NHD was required in eighth grade, eighth graders scored higher than students in the non-NHD middle school on the social studies segments of the 2008-2009 state *PASS* test, at statistically significant levels ( $p < .05$ ). Higher percentages of the NHD students (36% vs. 23%) received an Exemplary rating.

In Colorado, high school students participating in NHD and *International Baccalaureate (IB) History* had the highest test scores for all IB subjects offered at the school, with the average grade of 5.02 on a 7 scale, and scored above the worldwide IB History average of 4.1.

- ***The skills students gain through NHD transfer to other academic subjects.*** NHD students also often outperform their peers on standardized assessments in reading, science, and math. In 2006-07, 2007-08, and 2008-09, the percentage of NHD students in the Texas study site who met the minimum, had commended performance, or passed the *TAKS* the first time was higher than comparison group students in reading comprehension, writing, mathematics, and science. Differences were statistically significant ( $p < .001$  level for commended performance in all subjects except writing, where  $p < .01$ ). In Texas, NHD students' year-end grades in language arts, math, science, as well as in social studies, were higher than comparison group students'.

In 2008-09, the South Carolina NHD school led the district with a 61 percent passing rate in English 1. Their performance was 9 percentage points higher than the non-NHD school, and 4 points above the district's passing rate. At the NHD middle school, eighth graders scored higher than students in the non-NHD middle school on the Language Arts, Math, and Science segments of the 2008-09 *PASS* test.

---

<sup>3</sup> Because states (in this case TX, SC, NJ, and CO) have different standardized assessments, data analyses were conducted by state, by metric; data could not be aggregated across sites.

- ***Trend data suggests that NHD participation has a cumulative impact over time.*** A comparison of grades to years of participation in the Texas study site showed an upward trend, or higher levels of performance with each year of participation. A comparison of percentages of students receiving Commended Performance to years of participation also suggests upward trends.

## Interest in History and Civic Engagement

(Data sources: student surveys<sup>4</sup>, N=458, and interviews)

- ***NHD inspires an interest in history and a deeper understanding of why it's important.*** Compared to students who don't participate, NHD students are more interested in their history classes, and find those classes more interesting than their other academic classes. NHD students' interest in parallels in history and in issues in context is higher than their peers, at statistically significant levels. The NHD experience and the disciplinary knowledge students gain gives students a deeper understanding of why they should study history, and equips them to further develop that knowledge through real research.
- ***NHD students have a more mature perspective on current events.*** Although survey responses suggest that both NHD and non-NHD students are fairly engaged in current events, NHD students are more interested, at statistically significant levels, in staying abreast of current issues. Data showed statistically significant differences in NHD students' confidence in their knowledge of history and events *not* studied in school, and in their skills in using and evaluating online information. Findings may not confirm that NHD students are better informed, but does indicate that they are more likely to do things that keep them informed and involved.
- ***To a greater degree than their peers, NHD students develop dispositions needed for an informed citizenry.*** NHD students are more likely to see how studying the past informs the present and the future. That they can articulate those interests suggests not only a longer view of history but also an ability to reflect on their learning. Analyses show that NHD's impact on students' interest in history, confidence in research and communication skills, and sense of civic engagement hold true across grade levels, gender, and race/ethnicity—and may increase with years of participation.
- ***NHD has a positive impact among students whose interests in academic subjects may wane in high school.*** Analyses show that among Black and Latino students, NHD students still outperform non-NHD students, posting higher performance assessment scores and levels of interests and skills. Compared to non-NHD boys, and to all girls, boys participating in NHD reported significantly higher levels of interest in history, civic engagement, and confidence in research skills, on both pre- and post-surveys.

---

<sup>4</sup> Students in all 4 sites (N=458) completed the same surveys. Data were aggregated across sites, and broken down by site, gender, ethnicity, and years of NHD participation.

